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Abstract: Drawing from Afro-pessimist and feminist film theory, the article proposes a rethinking of theories of racialization and Blackness in and through film. Through a critique of film theories related to the concept of suture and its models of pleasure, identification and subjectivation, the article shows why Blackness in film must not simply be considered through authentic representation or progressive production, but in terms of a disruption of black symbolic death. This disruption is theorized as a cinema of displeasure and irritation, aspects of which will be exemplified with a short consideration of the movie *Suture*.

Keywords: *Suture*; enslavism; Black symbolic death; politics of displeasure; critical race theory; Black film

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Disrupting Enslavist Suture: Black Film as a Cinema of Displeasure

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[B]ecause the oppressiveness of black cultural identity is so intimately connected to the anguish and anxiety of the visible, of the epidermal schema, the cinema would potentially be a prime site for the corroboration of such an identity. Its corroboration, however, takes place not on the screen (or not only on the screen) but in the theater itself. (Doane 226)

I. The Blackness(es) in and of Film

Studies concerned with Black Film often consist of no more than a consideration of a film through the racial background of its director or the setting and design of its narrative. In a classic definition, Thomas Cripps wrote:

[...] black film may be defined as those motion pictures made for the theater distribution that have a black producer, director, and writer, or black performers; that speak to black audiences or, incidentally, to white audiences possessed of preternatural curiosity, attentiveness or sensibility toward racial matters; and that emerge from self-conscious intentions, whether artistic or political, to illuminate the Afro-American experience. In the latter part of this century, this definition might be expanded to include major motion pictures and other projects made for television, as well as films that, despite foreign origins in, say, Africa, speak to Afro-American concerns." (140)

Black Film, in this case, is a question of owning the means of self-representation and producing counter-narratives to negative racial stereotypes and racial tropes commonly reproduced in existing mainstream cinema. Blackness,¹ here, is not a quality found in the filmic itself, but of two other things: it describes aspects of the plot and signifies a quality of economic disalienation. Since the publication of Cripps' foundational *Black Film as Genre*

(1978), writing on Black Film has considerably developed and diversified, moving away from potentially essentializing theories of representing Blackness to Black Film as a social and artistic practice producing Blackness. Yet, no alternative authoritative definition has been produced and the solution to the conundrum of if and how to frame the Blackness of and in film with or without reference to the racialized identities of its makers remains disputed. Recent approaches to Black Film have, however, complicated the understanding of those racialized identities. Authors such as Frank Wilderson and other Afro-pessimist writers base their work on film on elaborate theories of anti-blackness as the foundational principle of White identities and the global Northwestern civil societies in which they present the official 'norm,' such as the United States of America. According to these writers, Orlando Patterson's diagnosis that "social death" (38) – that is, a life exposed to gratuitous violence, injured or withheld personhood and denied humanity – constitutes the defining characteristic of Black life under slavery still accurately describes the situation of people racialized as Black in what many now perceive to be post-slavery or even post-racial societies.²

Due to the foundational function of anti-blackness for these societies, a simple switch of ownership of the means of representation to Black people does not suffice to produce Black Film, because that ownership does neither automatically nor necessarily mean that the films produced cease partaking in the filmic reproduction of anti-blackness. Therefore, rather than through ownership of the means of production, a film becomes Black through a proactive engagement with, denouncement of and resistance to anti-blackness and White "enslavism" (Broeck). From this perspective, a Black film is neither a film that accurately represents 'authentic' Blackness as such or creatively portrays and produces new modes of Blackness as individually performed identities, but a Black Film is a film that traces the socio-political formation of Blackness in order to disrupt generalized anti-blackness and therewith, at least momentarily, suspend Black social death. Accordingly, Frank Wilderson dismisses most mainstream movies created by Black people from the Black Film genre and criticizes them for merely blackening a White narrative, that is, for leaving the social logic of systemic anti-blackness intact, for example by extending the myth of individual achievement in a manner that obscures or straight-out denies the impact of structural discrimination. Although Wilderson, too, silently reserves the category of Black Film for films produced, directed and starring people racialized as Black, his writing indicates how and why ownership of the tools of production and creation is not enough. He defines the central question of Black Film scholarship as follows: "How do we explain a White political cinema genuinely anxious about government corruption, the integrity of the press, a woman's right to choose, the plight of turtles and whales or the status of

the public square, and a Black political cinema calling for the end of the world?" (*Red* 131). According to Wilderson, every Black film, by the fact of being a product of and witness to Black life and thus an assertion of Blackness in a society that cannot accommodate such assertions, is as such subversive and revolutionary. By calling this approach "the end of the world," he emphasizes the radicalism of these assertions in the societies of the global Northwest, where Whiteness is both normative and normal. Even so, any film that does simply propose variations on the 'official' narratives of race (e.g. Obama's presidency as the proof of a post-race and color-blind United States society) is White in that it helps reproduce White civil society and White normativity by choosing not to condemn the anti-black violence and structures of neo-slavery it is built on.

However interesting or inspiring one might consider an Afro-pessimist re-thinking of Black Film, what strikes out underneath its radical rhetoric is its perfectly conservative approach to the filmic as such. Indeed, the location of Blackness in Wilderson's writing on film is simply within the stories films tell. His analysis of Black Film is no more than an analysis of revolutionary characters and action in film, and the primary example he chooses to give is Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1979), in which the main Black character stabs a White policeman to death with an umbrella for having sexually abused her daughter (*Red* 117–148). Against such reductionist approaches to film and their marginal attention to the filmic proper, as well as against their limitation of the disruptive potential of films to disquieting storylines, the present article will shift the theoretical attention from content to form and its relationship with the spectator. This is considered an expansion, not a rebuttal of the Afro-pessimist approach to film in general and Black Film in particular. Instead of focusing on what a film might literally say, the focus of this essay will be on how it is said and what effect that 'how' has on the spectator. It will be emphasized that any failure to consider this 'how' might lead to an unwitting participation in the reproduction of Blackness as minor or negatively valued. Research into Blackness of and in film should neither simply focus on the production side, nor can it jump from socio-economic disalienation to the disruption of White civil society and its dispositives without considering the point of passage between the on-screen and of-screen worlds: the spectator. It is this spectator who will be put at the center of the following propositions by a consideration of the concept of suture as theorized by Kaja Silverman, among others. It will be argued that any consideration of Black Film must take into account formalist interrogations and spectator interaction with what they see, or they might risk reproducing anti-blackness in the deep structures of both making films and thinking about them. In order to elaborate on this, the following pages will not focus on a critique of Black Film as such, but consider instead how the large corpus of general film theory has largely

failed to consider race and specifically anti-blackness because it is mostly produced from positions that are assumed to be universally valid (viz. un-raced), yet are in fact White. As will be argued, such an uncritical adoption of inherently White subject positions in writing about, watching and making films – and the formalist language connected to them – manifests Black social death as *Black symbolic death*. In order to solve this problematic, an alternative approach to Film Theory and the Blackness of and in film will be proposed in the conclusion to this article. Drawing inspiration from feminist film theory, it will be argued that films and film studies that do not reproduce Blackness as minor and negative can potentially cause displeasure and frustration in the normative non-/anti-Black citizen-spectator. After and beyond Afro-pessimism, therefore, Black Film must be understood as a *cinema of displeasure* and irritation, aspects of which will be exemplified with a short consideration of the 1993 movie *Suture*.

II. Race and Suture

The relationship between spectator and film has been one of the central interests of Film Studies since the 1970s. Engaged with questions of cinematic pleasure, projection and identification, earlier works on the subject often drew from psychoanalytic theory and its notions of desire to explain why a viewer would want to watch and respond to the spectacle cinema offered him. Importantly, this analysis considered cinema in terms of representation and explained its effects by reading cinema through the prism of prior and assumedly universal human conditions that were more or less well mirrored and mobilized in films. Drawing from the work of Jacques Lacan, Christian Metz claimed that the relationship between the implied spectator and the symbolic order of the film is the same as the relationship between the subject and the socio-symbolic order. Metz considered cinematic desire and identification “secondary” processes imbricated on the desire and identification constitutive of the subject-formation that precedes the cinematic spectator (Metz 32–40). Rather than create completely new desires and identities at the risk of producing non-pleasurable dissonances between the social and the viewing subject, Metz insisted that cinema in general seeks to guarantee enjoyment, that is, it tends to (and thus molds itself along the lines of) always-already existing social subjects and their structures of enjoyment in order to generate the attendance and revenue necessary for its reproduction (6–7).

Equally Lacan-inspired, the concept of suture offers a similar model of thought, both assuming a given and urgent desire of the viewer to take part in the symbolic universe represented in a film’s discourse and attempting

to explain how films enable such a participation. Jacques-Alain Miller proposed the authoritative definition of this concept:

Suture names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse [...] it figures there as the element which is lacking, in the form of a stand-in. For, while there lacking, it is not purely and simply absent. Suture, by extension – the general relation of lack to the structure of which it is an element, inasmuch as it implies the position of a taking-the-place-of.” (25-26)

Kaja Silverman has translated this conception into Film Studies by writing: “The concept of suture attempts to account for the means by which subjects emerge within discourse” (199–200). Suture attempts to explain how, through identification enabled by specific formal procedures, one comes to occupy a place within the filmic narrative by being connected to a specific symbolic position in it. What are these formal procedures? As Silverman elaborates, “Theoreticians of cinematic suture agree that films are articulated and the viewing subject spoken by means of interlocking shots” (201). The syntax of alternating shots supposedly gives the spectator the illusion of partaking in the intra-diegetic action. The alternation creates both the illusion of a movement in three dimensional space and conceals from the viewer the limitations imposed on that movement by the single frame of what is in reality only a two dimensional space. Interlocking shots are supposed to prevent the viewer from becoming aware of the fact that for everything he sees on the screen, there is more outside the screen that he not only does not see, but which is not in his power to see, even if he wanted to. The alternating shots perform suture through the art of “*agnotology*” (Proctor and Schiebinger): the viewer has the illusion of partaking in the narrative because he is kept willingly ignorant of the things he doesn’t know (and can’t know or do), but which structure his perception no less. That is: the viewer is kept willingly unaware of his constitutive limitation by and within filmic discourse and thus unaware of that discourse itself and ultimately one with it. This ‘willing unawareness’ is one of the central axioms of suture theory. However, this ignorance of constitutive limits is not violently forced upon the spectator. Rather, it is assumed that the spectator not only accepts, but even desires suture – desires the illusion of being one with the filmic discourse in order to avoid symbolic castration. It is assumed that the spectator accepts an existence in predetermined categories (such as camera perspective; Metz 35-36) because he does not want to remain outside the world formed in, by and as spectacle. This desire is proposed as the reason why suture is possible. The cutting and editing of a film do not trick the spectator, but tend to the spectator’s pre-existing desire to avoid disidentification with what he is offered.

What the agreement among film theoreticians mentioned by Silverman amounts to, though, is an overrepresentation of a specific desire as universally valid and adoptable. In order to make sense, this theory of cinematic suture as direction of desire must assume and presuppose a standardized/'normal' spectator with a standardized/'normal' desire and a standardized/'normal' perspective that produces predictable because standardized/'normal' effects in the spectator. And this assumed spectator is not only white but also male and straight. It must, in other words, assume not only that spectators are always-already determined by normalizing dispositives but constitutively in harmony with them. Without such a harmonious normalized spectator the cinematic process could neither claim to be universal, nor would it be able to anticipate or direct the spectator's desire. Desire and identification, here, are therefore understood as being independent of who the spectator is. As a result, this agreement suffers from a constitutional blindness to the exclusions and disidentification performed by discourse both prior to the spectator's visit to the cinema and subsequently during that visit. Such a concept of suture, as Metz indicated, does not create the spectator, but relies on prior processes of subjection, which it reiterates. Silverman is aware of this premise, as she writes: "The system of suture functions not only constantly to reinterpellate the viewing subject into the same discursive positions, thereby giving that subject the illusion of a stable and continuous identity, but to rearticulate the existing symbolic order in ideologically orthodox ways" (221).

It is at this point that an Afro-pessimist critique can be picked up and expanded to explain how films and Film Theory produce Black symbolic death corresponding to Black social death. The basic observation here is the following: within the White civil societies of the global Northwest, the position of 'standardized/normal' is occupied by Whiteness.³ Therefore, theories foundationally built on the assumption of a 'normal' and single desire occupy a White default position engaged with a White spectator and White desire. In these theories, Blackness does not exist, except in those stereotyped forms necessary to articulate the White normative spectator in a manner that permits him suture. If, as Afro-pessimism insists, Black social death is the foundational characteristic of societies in the global Northwest, then any film that "rearticulate[s] the existing symbolic order in ideologically orthodox ways" (Silverman 221) reproduces that social death. It does so in the form of Black symbolic death: the erasure of the Black spectator from the realm of theory and from Black desire and Black modes of (dis)identifying from and exiting (or refusing to enter) the intra-diegetic film worlds. Thinking of Black Film in terms of self-representation and self-production of Blackness as well as disruption of anti-blackness, the question leading further enquiry would thus be: how does one disrupt Black symbolic

death? Let us proceed towards this question by considering first what the existence of Black symbolic death implies for suture theory.

While it is correct to note that—according to suture theory—the use of a stand-in mentioned by Jacques-Alain Miller applies to everyone independent of racialized identities, one must ask how such a universal suture could possibly apply to multiple agonistic subjects at the same time in the same way. Suture must be understood as an attempt to create a ‘transparent’ signifier in which the subject and the dispositives that create it are never dissonant but always harmonious. Black Film and its theory become disrupting factors in Film Theory and cinema in general, by noting that such transparency and harmony can neither be assumed between the Black spectator and the White symbolic order potentially reproduced in cinema, nor is it desired from the perspective of that order. Consider, for instance, the following quote in the light of Frantz Fanon’s description of the colonial gaze: “Thus [through the shot/reverse shot] a gaze within the fiction serves to conceal the controlling gaze outside the fiction; a benign other steps in and obscures the presence of the coercive and castrating Other. In other words, the subject of speech passes itself off as the speaking subject” (Silverman 204).

This “benign” ersatz-Other who steps in is exactly what is missing for Fanon when he is faced with the coercive and castrating gaze of the infamous little boy pointing a finger at him and saying “Maman, regarde le nègre, j’ai peur” (Fanon 90).⁴ Fanon is not protected from the finger directing the social gaze like a camera would direct the gaze of the spectator in the cinema. He is not looking, but looked at and it is precisely this unprotected being-looked-at-ness—that is, the dependence of his self-conception on the conception that the White “coercive and castrating Other” posed by Silverman has of him—that (from a Lacanian perspective, such as that of the early Fanon quoted here) makes it possible for that little boy’s gaze to socio-symbolically castrate him, shatter his self-image and reiterate his social death. Even though the Black man in Fanon’s example would want suture into the narrative of “Look ...!”, even though the subject of speech would like to experience itself as the speaking subject, he is not offered such suture except as stereotype (Bhabha 115). Rather than offering suture to every/body, any spectacle structured by White civil society precisely aims to reiterate this castration of the Black Other and to keep him consciously dependent on the master’s gaze. The Black man in Fanon’s example not only cannot, but must not identify with a protective ersatz-Other in order to move from speech to speaking; he does not speak (viz. his speaking is not recognized as such), but as a Black man in a White society, he is spoken about and must remain so. Therefore, a (socio-)symbolic existence as such is not available to the socially and symbolically dead, except—as will be

argued below – as living dead, as a haunting that would appear in the White colonial gaze as a source of displeasure.

In analyzing suture through the gaze and its formalist direction in cinema, one has to be careful – as Fanon himself emphasized – to understand how the gaze performs a connection between the inner eye (“l’oeil”) and the outer eyes (“les yeux”) that makes a racialized perception possible (163). It is important to analyze how that connection permits the White gaze an enjoyment of Whiteness that is as such – Whiteness being defined as non-Black – identical with Black castration and abjection, and which can only be considered as transparent and harmonious through an overrepresentation of the particular White gaze and desire as universal. To point out, as the feminist Kaja Silverman does, that suture is based on sexual difference (221), then, is to emphasize this overrepresentation of the patriarchal master-gaze and the reproduction of non-cinematic desire and its power-infrastructure that it potentially performs in the spectator through filmic discourse. To expand on Silverman, within a civil society not only patriarchal but also White, this reproduction means two things. Firstly, with Metz and his theory of cinema as a secondary process, it means that the pleasure of watching a film lies in its faithful reproduction of White patriarchy and that cinema is inherently conservative and repressive of alternative desires. Secondly, with Silverman and Fanon, it means reading cinema through the Oedipus complex in which ‘woman’ and ‘Blackness’ embody the displeasure of castration and it means equating suture with the assumption of a White heterosexual male position that by definition avoids such displeasure. This second reading also identifies the conservative moment of cinema, but it moves beyond that identification by summoning the specter of non-male and non-White desire. This premise has been at the heart of feminist film theory which has raised the possibility of the “destruction of pleasure as a radical weapon” in filmmaking (Mulvey 7), a notion that also indicates the direction the development of Black Film and its theory can take after and beyond Afro-pessimism.

Opening the possibility of displeasure in cinematic suture suggests that the cinematic apparatus permits performing a disruption in the socio-symbolic order (to whose perspective the term ‘displeasure’ refers), that it permits a disconnection between the inner and outer eye, between what we see and how we see it. If film theorists such as Christian Metz have suggested that cinema must produce pleasure by tending to the conservative desires whose formations precede the film in order to be able to perform suture, the post-Afro-pessimist paradigm for Black Film claims that films must seek to create the displeasure that precisely consists in giving space to those desires and pleasures unthinkable erased by the standardized/normal desire, to therewith subvert “ideologically orthodox” suture

and disrupt the (anti-Black) socio-symbolic order it upholds. But this displeasure cannot simply be located in narratives potentially unpleasant to the standardized/normal (White, male etc.) spectator, such as the murder of the White policeman in *Bush Mama* that Wilderson uses to illustrate his approach (117-148). Such storylines do not disrupt the suture-through-and-as-stereotype that produces Black symbolic death because they continue to rely on the standardized/universal model of desire and Oedipal castration to design and explain their actions. Before focusing on narrative content, one must therefore begin by asking how films might subvert the constitution and reproduction of these stereotypes and the socio-symbolic axioms and modes of racialization that frame them.

The function of suture – both in cinema and society at large – is to connect specific subjects or bodies with specific socio-symbolic identities or positions within discourse. Attempts by Thomas Cripps, directors such as Charles Burnett and others to think Black Film as authentic representation or as production of Blackness aimed to correct the identities attributed to Black bodies, but did not challenge the paradigm that there should be suture at all. To think of Black Film as a cinema of displeasure that disrupts suture is to raise that challenge: with ‘displeasure’ this cinema carries the term for the affect of that disconnection in its name. However, such a disconnection is not possible on the level of narrative alone, but can only be produced when also considering the formal level of film. At this level, a lag can appear, a slight deferment between bodies and identities that is the first signal of disruption. There are two ways to describe this lag: either from a standpoint that accepts the existence of a universal, standard and normal Oedipal desire, or from a standpoint that rejects it. In both cases that lag is a source of displeasure and therefore they will both be shortly compared here.

The first way of thinking lag is to consider suture through the Lacanian dictum of an imperative desire to identify; the second way of thinking lag is to refuse the notion of such an imperative desire and it most often takes the form of, as I would call it, a schizo-analytic approach to film. In the first case, lag would amount to the effect of the difference between one’s assumed identity and the one the cinematic gaze forces one to adopt (e.g. a Black woman forced to see herself in a movie through a White male gaze). Displeasure here, as Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks argues in her Lacanian enquiry into the relation of race and suture in the movie *Suture*, is the product of disturbed identification, of a disrupted desire to identify paired with an imperative to do so that imposes suture, even if a crippled and negative one (103-131).

In the second case, lag and displeasure might also be the effects of such a forced difference, but here this is only one possible, not a single necessary

model. In this model, lag must primarily be understood as the complete failure of suture, rather than the effect of a forced and crippled one. Not only can lag refer to a distance between the social identity of the spectator and that offered by the cinematic gaze, but its emphasis on the possibility of refusing suture permits the articulation of a crucial point. Lag implies more than a White male potentially refusing to identify with a White male gaze and attempting to occupy a different subject position (a possibility which might be read as White entitlement). It also points out how the abject can refuse to identify with and be erased under stereotype-as-suture, how the Black man or woman can refuse to identify with Sambo or Mammy, but how they might also chose to identify with another position, how they might refuse symbolic death and appear in a discourse they are in principle barred from by simply adopting a position other than the stereotypes they are supposed to suture into. In this case, displeasure arises not from a crooked identification, which the spectator might desire and want to avoid at the same time, but from the uncertainty of identification and the malleability of identities that are produced in the interaction between film and spectator, from the slipperiness of multiple possible points of suture and non-suture.

Obviously, these two ways of approaching suture and displeasure have different political potential. The Lacanian approach technically suggests that, because of the imperative to identify, a White straight conservative might be violently forced to identify with a transgender gaze—as Judith Halberstam suggests in her use of the concept of suture—just as a Black person might be forced to see herself through a White camera gaze. Here, displeasure is not a transformative concept, but describes (in a Lacanian perspective) the everyday experience of non-standardized/normal spectators forced to adopt any position, even one displeasing to occupy, just in order to have an identity at all.

The schizo-analytic approach to suture—refusing the imperative to identify—emphasizes the displeasure arising out of a cinematic undoing, rather than imposing of identities. It refuses the idea that a spectator is forced to occupy a displeasing position and emphasizes how the non-existence of an ersatz-Other for certain viewers causes different modes of suture ranging from the plenitude of the transparent signifier in which the spectator becomes one with the spectacle to symbolic death in which both instances are completely separate. This approach also points out how the ersatz-other allows the standardized/normative spectator to assume a position within the filmic narrative that is simultaneously identifying and distancing, that is only a quasi-suture (as opposed to a total suture) in which lag permits the disruptive and transformative presence of displeasure of failed rather than simply crooked suture. To propose thinking of Black Film as a cinema of displeasure is to suggest a cinema that takes account of this ambivalent

nature and function of suture and displeasure and directs its focus to the unraveling of the standardized/normal (White enslavist) subject through film. It is to suggest a cinema that exploits the potential of lag to impact the formation of subjects and, through suture, the relation between bodies and discourse, subjects and symbolic orders. In order to further illustrate this point, a quick consideration of two scenes from the 1993 film *Suture* will be of help.

III. Race in *Suture*

The narrative of *Suture*—the movie—is very standardized. *Suture* is a thriller in which Vincent Towers kills his father in order to claim his large inheritance. He then attempts to make his half-brother, Clay Arlington, responsible for the murder by exchanging their IDs and having him burn beyond recognition in a car-bomb explosion, a scheme that ultimately fails. Yet there is one twist that can be observed exemplarily in the following two scenes:

Scene I: Vincent (V) has just picked up Clay (C) from the airport. They are having a conversation in the car while Vincent is driving them both to his home (See fig. 1)

C. Nobody knows we're brothers. Not my friends, not my girlfriend, no one. And I have no plans to tell anyone, that's completely up to you.

V. Thank you for honoring my wishes.

C. It's just [...] when I saw you at the funeral, to see how much we look alike [...]. It just didn't seem right to not at least say 'hello' and to meet you. At least once; I just felt I had to do it. You know: common blood [...].

V. Yes, 'common blood,' I think I understand Clay [...]. Our physical similarity is disarming, isn't it? (*Suture* 04:24–05:06).

Scene II: After surviving the explosion of the car bomb, Clay's disfigured face is reconstructed by Dr. Renee Descartes (R). In the process, the two slowly fall in love. In several scenes, Renee tries to convince Clay (who now suffers from amnesia and thinks he is Vincent) that he has not killed his father. (See fig. 2)

R. It was just a dream; you have far to elegant a nose to have shot someone. You have what they call a Greco-Roman or American nose [...] sleek, with a small prominence at the bridging point. [...] physiognomists were sure that people with Greco-Roman noses were inclined towards music and literature and the arts, definitely not deviant behavior like killing people.

C. Is that supposed to make me feel better?

R. Yes! And there's more [...] I'm not just making this up! I collect books on

characterology and physiognomy. It used to be a complete science. You have a crisp, angular jaw: a sign of patience and refinement. And your fine, straight hair: almost always a sign of good mental temperament, not to mention digestion. And your mouth: thin, smooth lips, slightly open, lips that are a sign of an affectionate, kindhearted and generous person. (*Suture* 1:05:10–1:06:40)



Fig. 1. Vincent Towers: “Our physical similarity is disarming, isn’t it?”



Fig. 2. Renee Descartes: “It was just a dream; you have far too elegant a nose to have shot someone.”

These written dialogues must be cross-read with the film stills in order to understand how they disrupt suture. It is the lag between the intradiegetic Whiteness of the main protagonist and the Black racialized body of the actor who plays that protagonist that produces a cognitive dissonance further emphasized by the dialogue. This lag disturbs the spectator's own suture into the movie, as the double racial nature of the protagonist/actor problematizes identification and potentially creates an awareness of the function of the spectator's own racialized identity within processes of filmic suture. It is an example of a refusal to mold cinema along primary identifications and the frustration and displeasure this can cause in the standardized/normative subject. Although the racial lag between body/actor and identity/character is non-existent in the intra-diegetic world of *Suture*, it is constantly in the spectator's gaze in the form of the disconnection between narrative and form, between his off-screen socio-symbolic racialization and the on-screen subversion of that mode of racialization. While the viewer is very well aware that all of this is just a movie—just play and performance—he is simultaneously made aware of his interiorized racializing imperatives. Why does watching *Suture* cause such irritation? Why, after all, should a Black actor not play a White character? These questions have the potential to begin unraveling the socio-symbolic suture of race and bodies and to be a source of displeasure for the (normative) spectator, independently of the standard plot and the use of the common mechanics of cinematic suture by the film. The cause for displeasure is not the narrative, but the tension between the spectator's pre-formed experience and implicit understanding of race and the de-racializing formalism of the filmic itself. Rather than reproducing race as natural and immediately self-explanatory to common sense (viz. 'transparent'), *Suture* problematizes its construction as well as its role in the creation of identification necessary for suture.

Blackness in and of film is thus to be understood as a quality of disrupting the standardized/normative order by introducing subject formations and desires that are incompatible with the Whiteness large parts of Film Theory rely on and reproduce. By disrupting suture and de-naturalizing race—as the example has shown—film can destabilize standardized/normative modes of racialization and its production of Black symbolic and social death. This Blackness in and of Black Film is not based on the racialized identities of its creators (as the example of *Suture*, whose directors Scott McGehee and David Siegel are both racialized as White, shows), but it is a quality of the filmic itself and describes its interventions into the socio-symbolic order of the of-screen White civil society through its effects on the spectator.

IV. Conclusion: Disrupting Suture, Disrupting Enslavism

Considering the critique and example just offered, it is clear that – against the Lacanian imperative desire to identify even at the price of subjection to social and symbolic death – the presence of the ‘benign’ ersatz-Other of suture will not suffice to have just any spectator identify with it. This implies that there is no advancement in understanding Blackness in and of film if one reduces its definition to a claim to the ownership of the means of creating and producing a film and thereby simply changing the nature of the ersatz-other so as to re-enable suture for an assumed Black spectator – as for example the emphatic reception of Melvin van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* by Huey Newton and the Black Panthers (Wiggins 41) or Frank Wilderson’s reading of *Bush Mama* might suggest. Rather, one can think of a cinema of displeasure when considering – as Manthia Diawara points out in his discussion of Black spectatorship – that cinema always also creates “resisting spectatorship” (893). The critique of classic cinema as just another form of coloniality – just another form of opium for the (assumedly homeostatic) masses – ignores all those to whom classical cinema refuses a point of entry into its symbolic order, that is, all those whose social death off-screen translates into symbolic death on-screen. This critique ignores the racially conservative character of most of cinema and, moreover, the resistance – the “oppositional gaze” (hooks 115) – as well as the haunting it produces. It ignores cinema’s potential to not only harbor, but also foster dissent. It ignores the decolonial potential of cinema. It ignores that “it cannot be assumed that black (male or female) spectators share in the ‘pleasures’ which such films [as “The Birth of a Nation” or “Beverly Hills Cop”] are able to offer to white audiences” (Diawara 896). It is not sufficient, then, to simply complement existing definitions of Black Film with a critique of suture that explains how it ignores Black symbolic death and assumes passive selves under a totalitarian imperative to subject and identify themselves. Any understanding of Black Film must revolve around the question of the impossibility of Black desiring in the orthodox cinema of White civil society. Black Film must analyze the political constitution and enforcement of this orthodox cinema and its orthodox desire in order to be able and set out to frustrate it. Within the realm of post-Afro-pessimism, Black Film should thus turn away from the orthodox and racialized pleasure Afro-pessimism still relies on in its theorization and become a cinema of displeasure in which Black symbolic death is undone. If it is the role of a cinema of pleasure to reproduce the enslavist powers that be through such instruments as suture, then a cinema of displeasure aims at disrupting suture and disrupting enslavism, aims at disconnecting viewer and narrative, body and discourse. Instead of reproducing ideologically orthodox subjects, Black Film would mobilize the abject to disrupt

orthodox subject-formation. To think of Black Film as a cinema of displeasure is not merely a rational correction to an insufficient prior understanding of the term. It has potentially politico-activist implications precisely by disrupting theory on a visceral level, by mobilizing affects such as irritation and frustration in order to make present and tangible the unconscious blind spots necessary for White self-overrepresentation and Black social and symbolic death to function. The elaboration of this cinema's crisis potential, located at the intersection of psyche, knowledge, affect, politics and discourse must always be a project progressing with critiquing the constantly changing modes of enslavism.

Instead of finishing by authoritatively delineating it here, closure will therefore be performed by emphasizing that a cinema of displeasure is just one section of a general politics of displeasure. Suture theory's notion of seeking to create pleasure in the spectator in order to reproduce not only the orthodox subject but also the capital to make yet another film makes obvious the potentially repressive nature of pleasure and desire in a social formation where orthodox pleasure is exclusive to a privileged group and where it is often based on the displeasure of non-privileged groups. Therefore, in moving from cinematic representation and cinematic production of Blackness to the disruption of anti-blackness and Whiteness, from pleasure to displeasure, one does not merely change one's theoretical vantage point. Rather, one changes the emphasis from analysis to *aeskesis*, from looking at a monadic Other to working on the inter-being and mutual constitution of subject and abject, self and other, pleasure and displeasure. By introducing this shift to Black Film, a cinema of displeasure offers a different way of both thinking and doing race not only *in* but *through* cinema.

Notes

- ¹ 'Black' and 'Blackness' as well as 'White' and 'Whiteness' will be written with capital letters when referring to racialized identities.
- ² Afro-pessimism shares with other schools of thought in contemporary Black Studies the conviction that, since the abolition of slavery, social configurations such as forced convict labor, the war on drugs and the contemporary Prison Industrial Complex have continued the dehumanization and commodification of Black life, merely transforming Black people from slaves to "neo-slaves" (James) or "prison-slaves-in-waiting" (Wilderson, "The Prison Slave" 18). For a detailed discussion and critique of the idea of a post-racial society, see Cho; Rich.
- ³ For the sake of argument, this article will generally refer to a generic Whiteness and ignore its non-homogenous character.
- ⁴ "Mama, look, a Negro, I'm scared!" (Fanon, *Black Skin* 91)

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